

# View from The Overlook



THE JOURNAL OF THE CLEVELAND HEIGHTS HISTORICAL SOCIETY

NO. 42 • FALL 2017

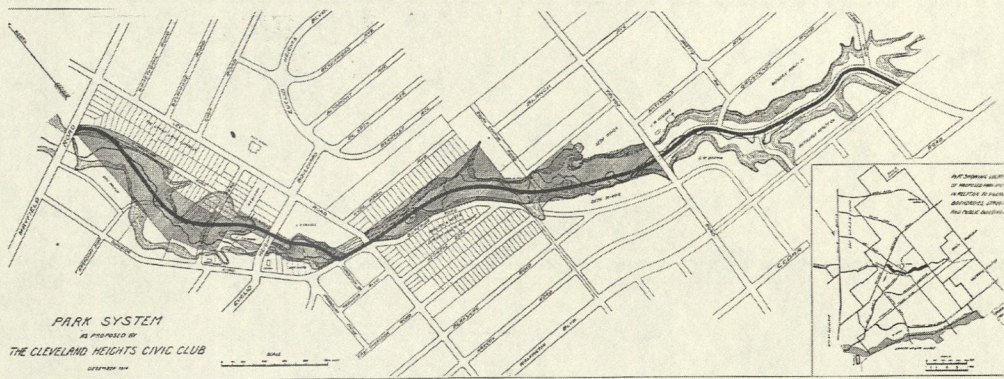
WWW.CHHISTORY.ORG

## Cleveland Heights' "Emerald Necklace": *Parks, Property, and Politics*

By Marian Morton

**O**n this sunny August afternoon, Cain Park Theater has just finished its 79th year of plays and concerts, and Cumberland Pool is full of swimmers who realize that summer is almost over. So do kids on the playground at Caledonia Park. In Forest Hill Park, folks are hiking, playing baseball and tennis, or lifting weights or ice skating in the park's Community Center. Young athletes are probably practicing in Denison Park's new soccer stadium. All park visitors enjoy the open green spaces and mature trees, scenic streams and steep gullies. This is why we think of our parks as places of active recreation and, at the same time, peaceful retreats to nature's beauty. Our parks have been these – and much more – for more than a century.

Since their beginnings, our parks have been important players in the city's economic and political life. Initially intended to enhance the property values of an ambitious young suburb, our parks also sometimes enhanced the political reputations of its elected officials. Most often places that promoted political unity and harmony, our parks have sometimes done the opposite.



## Shall Cleveland Heights Village Have a Park System?

### Background

In 1915, when the Cleveland Heights Civic Club first advocated a city-wide park system, they had Cleveland's splendid parks to emulate. A gift from John D. Rockefeller in 1896, the park that bears his name follows Doan Creek and links Wade Park at University Circle to Gordon Park on the lakefront along what is now Martin Luther King Boulevard. And in 1915, Cleveland was on the verge of creating what would become its stunning "emerald necklace" of green space, forests, and waterways that now encircles the city from Bradley Woods on the west to North Chagrin Reservation on the east.

Real estate developers on Cleveland Heights' south side had also donated parkland to Cleveland. The Van Sweringen brothers had donated the Shaker Lakes; Martha Ambler, 25 acres along a ravine south of North Park Boulevard down to Euclid Avenue. These constitute our city's southern boundary. In 1896, Patrick Calhoun donated properties along Euclid Avenue and up Cedar Glen to create the park that became University Circle and not incidentally, a grand gateway to his Euclid Heights allotment at the top of Cedar Hill. Calhoun, the Van

Sweringens, and Mrs. Ambler realized that nearby parks made even more desirable the upscale properties they were selling.<sup>1</sup>

Civic Club members were also well aware of the economic benefits of parks. A park system, claimed the club's 1915 pamphlet, would "enhance the value of property" nearby. The parks would be laid out along "the Ravine" that ran from Taylor to Mayfield Roads along the streams and gullies of Dugway Brook's East Branch. The rocky, brush-covered ravine was "[u]suited for the most part for building purposes," the pamphlet pointed out. Moreover, it "will in time become more and more a dumping ground (as it is even now in part) for tin cans and unwholesome rubbish of all sorts, breeding disease and endangering the health of the entire community." Why not transform this unsightly, unusable land into a "health resort instead of a menace to public health; a playground instead of a death-trap for innocent children; a recreation ground for adults instead of a pestilential region" and benefit nearby property owners at the same time? Best of all, the proposed site

<sup>1</sup> <http://www.clevelandmemory.org/speccoll/barrow/thesis/chapter4.html#sh3>.

In 1915, the Cleveland Heights Civic Club proposed this park system for the village.

was a bargain: because most of the land was still undeveloped, it would be relatively inexpensive for the city to purchase.<sup>2</sup>

The Village Council was persuaded, and so were voters who passed in 1915 a \$100,000 bond issue to acquire the necessary properties for our first parks. A bold step for a country village whose population even five years later barely exceeded 15,000.

### Cumberland Park

Our first park benefited small developers along the park's borders. Despite enthusiastic support for its pool and meadows, Cumberland has, from the first, been engaged in local politics.

The first property for the park was purchased in October 1915, when the city bought land fronting on Mayfield from Emil C. Preyer. Preyer's father, John Peter Preyer, a long-time resident of the village, had sold his vineyards to Marcus M. Brown, who turned them into his Mayfield Heights allotment. Emil himself developed Alvin Rd. (now Preyer Ave.), just to the north of his own home at 14287 Superior Rd. Both his home and Preyer Avenue would border the proposed park. However, according to the Village Council minutes of November 1915, the land was still being used as a dump: neighbors complained about "the burning of rubbish of all kinds, greatly to the discomfort of the citizens in the vicinity."

Most of the purchases for Cumberland Park were made in 1916. The biggest was from the Grant Land Company, which sold the city almost 13 acres. The company had bought the land from Charles Asa Post in 1909. It had been part of a 99-acre farm purchased in 1889 by Post and his business partner, James Haycox, another long-time village resident. The eastern portion of

<sup>2</sup> "Shall Cleveland Heights Village Have a Park System?" Vertical file, "Cleveland Heights", Western Reserve Historical Society, Cleveland, Ohio.

the Post-Haycox property became Whitethorn, Sycamore and Oak Roads and the site of the Cleveland Heights schools at Lee and Euclid Heights Blvd.

On the western portion, the Grant Land Company laid out Cumberland Road, described in a 1911 ad as "Directly opposite 'Forest Hill,' the beautiful estate owned by Mr. [John D.] Rockefeller," Cleveland Heights' most famous almost-resident. There were 30 large lots on Cumberland, continued the ad, zoned for single-family homes.<sup>3</sup> Buyers were apparently interested primarily in the east side of the street, however, probably because it was farther from the smelly ravine. Only two homes got built on the west side (the city bought these to clear the way for the pool in 1926). A proposed street slightly to the west of Cumberland, named Brunswick, appears on the 1912 Sanborn map but never got laid out. The Councilman in charge of purchasing land for the village parks was Fred C. Becker, who was also the treasurer of the Grant Land Company. A park would certainly sell more houses for his company than a ravine filled with rubbish.

The rest of the property acquisition for Cumberland Park went smoothly except for a dust-up with the congregation (now Forest Hill Church Presbyterian), whose building was at the foot of Preyer near Mayfield. The city wanted to widen Preyer five feet, offering to exchange this for five feet of park land. The congregation was not interested even though Cain was a member.

In 1924, noted landscape architect A.D. Taylor was chosen to design the park. He planned a large outdoor space for community gatherings, football fields, tennis courts, and most important, a swimming pool. The next year, voters passed another bond issue that paid for the handsome bathhouse and pool, which opened in summer 1927.

<sup>3</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 3, 1911: 24.

# The Cleveland Heights Historical Society



PO Box 18337  
Cleveland Heights, OH 44118  
heightshistory@gmail.com

## Board of Trustees

Ken Goldberg, President  
Stephen Titchenal, Treasurer  
Laura Peskin, Secretary  
Bill Hopkins  
Christopher Hubbert  
Michael Madorsky  
Korbi Roberts

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society, founded in 1983, is a state-chartered, 501(c)(3), not-for-profit organization.

## Our Mission

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society is dedicated to preserving and promoting the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights. As a community-based historic organization, the Society encourages and facilitates greater knowledge, understanding and awareness of the heritage of Cleveland Heights.

## From the President...

Recently we posted on our Facebook page several vintage photos of outstanding buildings that were in our fair city but lost to the ages. It is apparently a topic of much interest, and each post drew a generous amount of "likes" and comments. Cleveland Heights has lost about a dozen particularly distinctive, grand homes and, in most cases, they were replaced by inferior architecture — if any building at all. Once any building is lost, even if ordinary, it's lost to previous occupants and their families who might want to see it again, lost to the public who might have enjoyed experiencing at least the exterior, lost to a street or neighborhood, and there are lost tax benefits to the city if its replacement is estimated to have lower value.

Fortunately, Cleveland Heights has long been a community attracting those who wanted to restore older houses, and we certainly have plenty of those. At this moment, once spectacular mansions — one on Derbyshire Road, the other on Harcourt Drive — are being meticulously restored and, therefore, are no longer threatened with demolition and/or replacement with what might well have been ubiquitous condo projects. In each case — and there are other, though perhaps less dramatic examples — individuals came along who truly appreciated these once-magnificent residences and wanted to see them in their glory once more. This is how some of the best of the past can be carried over to the future, and thus the future is still even brighter for these homes' respective neighborhoods.

The Historical Society is always seeking individuals who respect our goals — to preserve and promote the diverse character and traditions of Cleveland Heights. There are much smaller communities whose historical societies have very active agendas including talks, tours, and exhibits that bring about greater knowledge, understanding, and awareness of their proud heritage. Perhaps you have a special interest you might want to pursue through us — e.g. creating enthusiasm among children in regard to history — in or out of school; working on a project which either saves a threatened building or works towards its rehabilitation; writing an article for *View* or speaking on a topic of your expertise; involvement in planning for a special event such as a fundraiser; staffing a Heights Heritage house that we co-sponsor; or planning a trip to places that might inspire us to create something new or make positive changes.

We could certainly use help with improving our website, planning events, seeking funding; scanning old and possibly threatened materials (e.g. the old Heights newspapers are still not text searchable!); publicizing what we do and working to increase membership — e.g. at local fairs and festivals; or responding to inquiries as to how to handle no-longer-wanted items. Please consider where you might fit in with your knowledge and enthusiasm. You may always contact us at heightshistory@gmail.com. We are most certain there is no lack of talent or expertise out there. Speaking of e-mail addresses, please make sure we have yours. — Ken Goldberg

Naming the park had already become a partisan political issue. The Village Council and Mayor Frank Cain initially hoped that the park would honor their favorite Republican, suggesting in February 1919, that the park be named "Roosevelt Park in everlasting memory of our late and beloved ex-president Theodore Roosevelt" and that a monument be built to him in the park.<sup>4</sup> (Roosevelt had just died.) The monument never got built, and the name never took, especially after the terms of President Franklin D. Roosevelt — not a favorite in Cleveland Heights. (Roosevelt Junior High School was named for the first Roosevelt.)

In 1943, in a gesture of wholehearted support for the country's war effort, residents honored the city's 5,400 men and women who served in the military with the modest wood and sandstone World War II Memorial that bears their names. The memorial was placed at the northernmost end of the park. But not without a fight. Veterans' groups wanted the memorial in a more public place — a shopping center perhaps. Mayor Cain wanted it at the foot of the park where it could be viewed from Mayfield. Cain won this one.

Plans to renovate the memorial after the passage of a bond issue in 1997 also stirred up controversy: should the existing, slightly shabby memorial be rejuvenated, or should new structures commemorating later wars be added? The awkward compromise: the city did both. Since these renovations, our annual Memorial Day services have been held at the Cumberland War Memorial and its additions — at the moment, symbols of political harmony.

## Cain Park

Like Cumberland Park, Cain Park's creation benefited nearby developers. Even more dramatically than Cumberland, Cain Park — quite literally

<sup>4</sup> *Cleveland Heights Dispatch*, February 3, 1919: 3.

— became the stage upon which local and national politics were played out.

Although the park hosts a widely recognized annual arts festival and boasts tennis courts, a splash pool, and a popular sledding hill, Cain Park is most closely identified with its theater program. One of the few municipally owned theaters in the country, it has produced famous alumni such as actor Hal Holbrook; John Price, founder of Musicarnival; and more recently, director Sarah May and playwright Rajiv Joseph. The theater's first decades have been lovingly described by its creator and long-time director, Dr. Dina Rees Evans, in *Cain Park Theatre: The Halcyon Years*. It is even immortalized in a movie — "Those Lips, Those Eyes."

The biggest single seller of land for this park was Seth Minor. Like the Preyers, the Minors — Seth and his brother Marion — were farmers turned-real estate entrepreneurs, residents since the 1860s. The brothers owned large holdings between Lee and Taylor, approximately between Mayfield and Superior. (Taylor south of Mayfield was originally named Minor Road.) Seth Minor was an early trustee of the village. In 1916, he and his family sold the city 13.7 acres fronting on Taylor, which became the eastern entrance to the park. They also donated two acres for a roadway if one was necessary.

Simultaneously, 102 acres of the Minor property on the park's northern border were being developed as Minor Heights. The new allotment was bordered by Euclid Heights Boulevard and Taylor, Superior, and Lee; its streets became Altamont, DeSota, and Hyde Park Avenues, and Berkeley and Minor Park Roads.

Minor Heights was marketed by Grant W. Deming, also the developer of the more upscale Forest Hill allotment directly west across Lee. A blizzard of advertisements from 1910 to 1917 touted Minor Heights' location near schools and churches, "... its unrivalled advantages as

a residential section, because of the high class character of its surroundings,” and its closeness to Cleveland – “a thirty-five minute ride from the square” on the Euclid Heights streetcar.<sup>5</sup>

The A.D. Taylor plan – and probably the city’s budget – had mandated that this section of the park remain undeveloped woods, streams, and meadows. But politics soon intruded into this pastoral setting. The steep slope at the eastern end of the park created a natural amphitheatre which seemed – to some anyway – a perfect setting for a football stadium. In 1926, stadium supporters, including the Heights Press and the local Kiwanis Club, got on the ballot a bond issue to pay for the stadium, but it did not win the necessary 55 percent of the vote. Supporters tried again in 1928. The stadium bond issue lost more decisively this time although voters did pass a \$1,000,000 school bond issue.

Although the stadium was a dead issue, Benjamin R. Roseman, the developer of the cluster of Tudor-style stores and apartments on Taylor and Superior Park Rd., had already named it “Stadium Square.” The name lived on through the 1930s, used by realtors to describe not only the stores and apartments on the west side of Taylor but the neighborhood on the east side. (Stadium Square Shoe Repair lasted until the 1980s.)

Frank Cain did not get to name a park, but he did get this park named after him. In 1934, Dr. Evans, then the drama teacher at Cleveland Heights High, staged a production of “Midsummer Night’s Dream” at the foot of the slope at the eastern end of the park, the proposed site of the football stadium. Since the park was still un-improved and un-named, Evans graciously suggested to Cain that the park be named in his honor. (The Alma Theater is named for Cain’s

<sup>5</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, September 11, 1910: 27.

wife.) Cain was the city’s most prominent elected official: on Council since 1909 and mayor from 1914 to 1946. He had seen Cleveland Heights population grow from 2,576 in 1910 to 54,992 in 1940 (in 1925, he had predicted it would reach 100,000); he helped create its strict zoning code, facilitated its streetcar system, and enthusiastically supported the development of its parks. Evans’ wise gesture ensured this powerful mayor’s continuing assistance and, of course, guaranteed that his name and political legacy would be long remembered.

During the Great Depression, Cain needed help from county and federal governments, who came to the rescue of the financially strapped city and built Cain Park’s first infrastructure. Unemployed veterans from the County Soldiers and Sailors Relief Commission, perhaps paid with Cain’s own money, began the work of clearing brush, culverting Dugway Brook, and building the theater’s stage and seats. And although no friend of Franklin Roosevelt’s New Deal, Cain supported the Works Progress Administration’s work on the landscape. Cain boasted that these improvements had cost the city almost nothing.

Cain Park Theater officially opened in 1938. The theater quickly became known for its excellent summer productions of popular plays and musicals as well as concerts and dance programs. These were staged in its amphitheater, using local talent.

But like Cain Park, it also served other public – and political purposes – especially during World War II. On July 4, 1942, the theater hosted a mass induction ceremony for 2,000 civil defense volunteers on the big stage. “The vast audience was thrilled with renewed patriotism,” recalled Evans. And on July 26, an original play, “Army Red,” which dramatized the strategies for alerting citizens to an enemy attack, drew the theater’s largest crowd ever. On August 2, 1942, an

enthusiastic audience joined in a “Victory Sing,” accompanied by the Cleveland Heights Symphony Orchestra, which was broadcast live on the radio. Throughout the war years, community lectures featuring political, religious, and military figures were held in the theater.<sup>6</sup>

Cain Park Theater’s post-war years, however, were rocky. Theater is considered by many to be a luxury, not a necessity, like, say, swimming or baseball. Consequently, even more than our other parks, the fortunes of Cain Park have been linked to the city’s economic well-being and its political will.

Although musicals through the 1950s drew good audiences, the theater lost money, and the facilities continued to deteriorate. A short-lived switch from community theater to concerts by big names like Sammy Davis Jr. and Harry Belafonte did not solve the problem. In the early 1960s, only the Heights Youth Theater did productions on the big stage, and during the 1970s, the amphitheater was dark – except for a production of “Our American Cousin” in 1973. All other programs were held in the much smaller Alma, which had begun as a puppet theater for children.

In 1979, the theater got a lucky break when one of its alumni, David Shaber, wrote a screenplay about a young man falling in love with theater and set the movie in Cain Park. The producers of “Those Lips, Those Eyes” spent \$100,000 refurbishing the amphitheater, encouraging the city and voters to spend public money on the theater once more. In 1987, a bond issue provided \$5 million for beautification and most significantly, a roof for the amphitheater, ending the threat of rain that had washed out many productions over five decades. The theater celebrated with lavish musicals like “Man of La Mancha” and

<sup>6</sup> *Dina Rees Evans, Cain Park Theatre: The Halcyon Years* (Cleveland, Ohio: Halcyon Publishing, 1980), 134-135.

“Pippin” on the big stage and smaller productions in the Alma.

However, those big community musicals have again proved too expensive. Although stars like Arlo Guthrie, Joan Baez, and Judy Collins can fill the amphitheater and the lawn seats, musicals are now performed on the Alma stage. An exception was this summer’s production of “The Music Man,” performed without costly sets and costumes and featuring the Contemporary Youth Orchestra.

### Caledonia Park

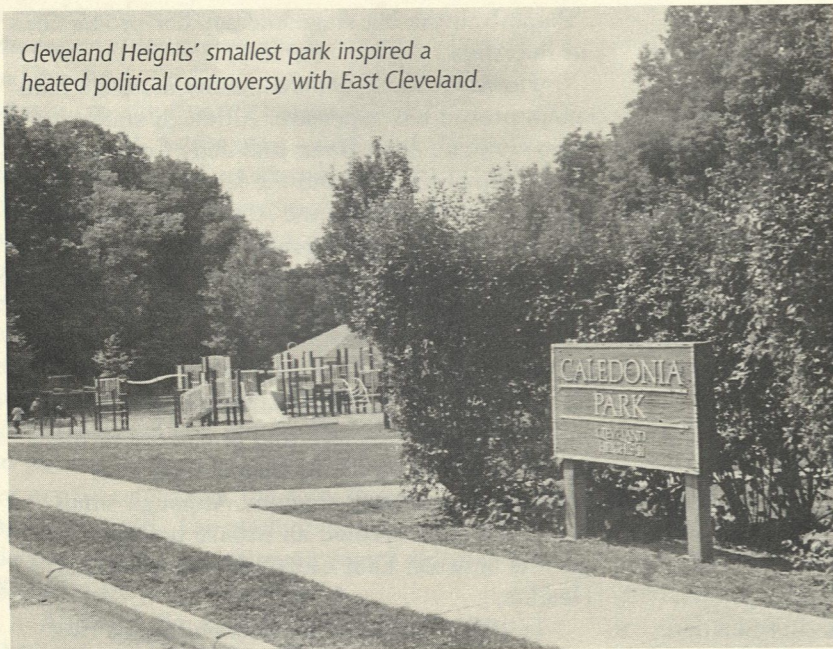
This smallest of the city’s parks was probably inspired by the optimism and prosperity of the mid-1920s that produced Cumberland Pool and talk of a football stadium. Although small, Caledonia Park created an outside political quarrel between East Cleveland and Cleveland Heights.

In 1925, Cleveland Heights purchased two parcels of land bordering East Cleveland from the Terrace View Land Company. Although these parcels in the northeast corner of the suburb were not contiguous to Cain or Cumberland Parks, the deed of sale stipulated that the land be used only for “park purposes” for twenty years. The parcels were directly behind Caledonia School, built in 1923 in Cleveland Heights by the East Cleveland school district for children of both cities.

City Council and Mayor Cain probably believed that this neighborhood would grow rapidly and that its proximity to prosperous East Cleveland, prestigious Nela Park, and the brand-new school was a plus. Certainly, a park would be a plus for the Terrace View Land Company, which was selling properties nearby on Caledonia Avenue and Ravine and Eloise Drives.

Company president was Heaton Pennington, a resident of East Cleveland and a prominent local realtor. In 1926, Pennington bought from John L. Severance the properties to the south

Cleveland Heights' smallest park inspired a heated political controversy with East Cleveland.



of his estate that became the Severn allotment. According to the Cuyahoga County Recorder's office, the Terrace View Land Company bought no properties after 1928. Perhaps because the Depression made real estate a tough sell or because Pennington's attention was focused on the Severn allotment. (Ninety-one lots in the allotment were sold at sheriff's auction in 1930.<sup>7</sup>)

Meanwhile, the city property behind Caledonia School sat unused for four decades after its purchase. In 1965, a report on the city's recreation facilities recommended that it be developed as a park in cooperation with East Cleveland. But nothing happened for almost another decade. In 1974, Caledonia Park, presumably named after the school or the street,

<sup>7</sup> Marian J. Morton, *Cleveland Heights: The Making of an Urban Suburb* (Charleston, SC: Arcadia Publishing, 2002), 91.

was included in the city's list of its summer parks that offered programs for children - arts and crafts and organized sports. The park property's small size limited its offerings.

The school itself had become a source of friction. When East Cleveland's fortunes faded, Cleveland Heights parents asked that their children be reassigned to the suburb's schools: in 1970 and 1976 (and again in 2000). Their requests were turned down by the state Board of Education, but they did not improve relations between the two cities.

Tensions boiled over in 1987. The bond issue that built a much-needed roof for the Cain Park amphitheater also set aside \$500,000 to expand Caledonia Park to four acres by including a ravine owned by East Cleveland although half of it was in Cleveland Heights. Cleveland Heights also offered to redraw the city's boundaries to include the East Cleveland section of the park, to build a playing field and picnic area, and to maintain the property; East Cleveland residents would be able to use the park for free.

In 1989, although East Cleveland was financially strapped, its City Council turned down the offer, offended that Cleveland Heights had set aside the money without consulting them. Cleveland Heights then offered East Cleveland \$5,000 for the property. Even more offended, East Cleveland turned this down too.

In 1990, however, newly elected East

Cleveland officials were more amenable to a deal. In 1991, after a three-year stalemate, East Cleveland Council agreed to lease the ravine to Cleveland Heights for \$1 a year for 50 years. East Cleveland would redraw its own boundaries so the ravine would be in Cleveland Heights, which would police and maintain it. Perhaps like good fences, good parks will make good neighbors.

### Denison Park

Like the other parks, Denison was created on property that could not easily be developed for homes. And like Cain and Cumberland Parks, Denison began as a symbol of political harmony.

Only two years after buying the parcels for Caledonia Park, Cleveland Heights annexed from South Euclid land between Belvoir and Monticello Boulevards. Most of it was an abandoned bluestone quarry, and the city planned to use it as a dump - not a park.

In January, 1945, the dump caused a political scandal. The front page of the *Cleveland Plain Dealer* revealed that a city worker had dumped raw garbage into the quarry - eight to ten truckloads in one morning, according to one reporter. Neighbors complained to the newspapers about rats and foul smells, adding that their calls to Cleveland Heights City Hall went unheeded.<sup>8</sup>

The garbage may explain why the property was still undeveloped in 1951 when the congregation of the Church of the Master bought from the city three parcels of land at Monticello Blvd. and Quarry Rd. Theirs was the only offer for the property. Ground-

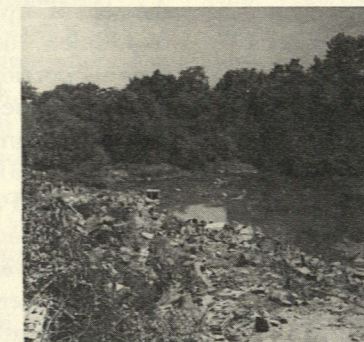
breaking ceremonies for their new Colonial-style building were held in September 1952.

Post-war prosperity and the movement of the city's population north and east eventually did prompt the creation of the park. Nearby streets - like Quarry and Keystone Drive and Hillstone and Allston Roads - had begun to fill with homes. In January 1954, City Council formally designated the property a park, and in April signed a contract for the building of ball diamonds, tennis courts and picnic equipment.

The park was officially dedicated on Memorial Day, 1955. The featured speaker was Frances P. Bolton, the Republican who represented Cleveland Heights in the U.S. House from 1939 to 1968. "The banner of patriotism flew mightily," exclaimed the *Plain Dealer*.<sup>9</sup>

Like Cain Park (and the erstwhile Roosevelt Park), the park honored a well-known elected official, Robert F. Denison. Denison had served even longer than Cain: as Councilman from 1913 to 1952 and as Vice-Mayor from 1932 to 1952. A lawyer and an expert on municipal finance, he was also one of the authors of the city's charter. Although Denison did not live near by the park, its neighborhood - and the city - now had good reason to remember his political achievements.

A bond issue in 1966 paid for a pool for Denison, but the pool did not open until 1970, two years past its scheduled date. The city sued the contractor because of shoddy work.



This dump became Denison Park, dedicated on Memorial Day, 1955. (Photo courtesy of Special Collections, Michael Schwartz Library, Cleveland State University)

<sup>8</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, January 4, 1945: 1.

<sup>9</sup> *Cleveland Plain Dealer*, May 31, 1955: 4.

From the 1970s until the Cumberland Park War Memorial was renovated, Denison became the destination for the city's Memorial Day parade, a sustained expression of political harmony.

The harmony was briefly disrupted when, due to budget constraints, the city closed Denison Pool in 2007. Neighbors responded angrily in public meetings and on the Internet. The new soccer stadium – the only one in Cleveland Heights – was perhaps intended to smooth ruffled feathers.

### Forest Hill Park

Unlike the other parks, Forest Hill was a gift to the city, but like the other parks, it was intended to bolster the values of surrounding real estate. This gift, our biggest park, caused the biggest political commotion.

City officials (and realtors like the Grant Land Company) had long coveted Rockefeller's estate. His home and most of his property (170 acres) were in East Cleveland, but the Cleveland Heights portion was significant (65 acres) and moreover, was contiguous to the northern end of Cumberland Park.

In 1923, Rockefeller sold the property, bounded roughly by Glynn Road in East Cleveland on the north, Taylor on the east, Mayfield on the south, and Superior Road on the west, to his son, John D. Rockefeller Jr. planned an ambitious residential development of 600 elegant homes, anchored by the Heights Rockefeller Building at the northeast corner of Mayfield and Lee. The development would be named Forest Hill after his father's estate. In 1925, the Rockefeller interests boasted that the development would cost \$60 million, but differences with the city over the location of Monticello Boulevard stalled the development through the 1920s.

Rockefeller's timing was dreadful. The first advertisements for the Forest Hill allotment appeared in 1930, months after the bot-

tom fell out of the American economy and the Great Depression began. Only 81 of the French Norman homes, most in East Cleveland, and the Heights Rockefeller building at Lee Boulevard and Mayfield in Cleveland Heights, were completed in the early 1930s. Home-building and buying slowed to a crawl in the mid-1930s.

In 1938, after his father's death, Rockefeller Jr. gave much of the original estate to East Cleveland and Cleveland Heights for a park, which would also be named Forest Hill to honor the city's richest neighbor. His father had built stables, a golf course, pathways, and a pond in the East Cleveland section of the park near his home. The Cleveland Heights portion, however, had remained undeveloped.

Thanks to the Depression, possibilities for the sale of any of this property were minimal. In addition, like the other parks, the Cleveland Heights portion of the estate was essentially unbuildable because it contained a quarry and the continuation of Dugway Brook – "the Ravine" of 1915 – that ran through Cain and Cumberland Parks.

The presence of a park, however, would much enhance the values of the still unsold portion of the development on the streets east of Lee and north and south of Monticello. These were successfully built up in the post-World War II era.

A.D. Taylor again was chosen to develop the Cleveland Heights portion of the park, and – as was the case in Cain Park, most of the park's infrastructure was built by the Works Progress Administration, most notably the bridge spanning Forest Hill Boulevard that linked the Cleveland Heights and East Cleveland portions of the park. The park formally opened in 1942.

In 1945, the Better Government League of Cleveland Heights urged that a community center be built at the southern end of the park. It would include an auditorium seating 1500 and offices

for community groups and would be financed by the sale of lots in the triangle created by Monticello, Lee, and Mayfield, as the Rockefeller gift had stipulated. The new Cleveland Heights Recreation Pavilion did open in February 1969 after the passage of a recreation bond issue in 1966. There was no auditorium, but there was an indoor ice skating rink.

Improvements to the Pavilion were the primary focus of the \$15 million bond issue of 1997: an additional ice rink, more basketball courts, a senior center, an afterschool childcare facility, more meeting rooms, more parking. These would obviously enlarge the footprint of the building, which would then be called the Community Center.

Thus began a bitter, bruising political battle, enthusiastically described by the Sun Press and occasionally the Plain Dealer. The expansion plans were initially approved by the Forest Hill Park Advisory and Fact Finding Commission that had to okay any changes to the park.

Aware of the politically sensitive nature of the project, the city had also hired Pressley Associates, a landscape design firm, to assess the impact of the plans and complete a survey of the park's natural landscape to guide future changes to the park.

The immediate responsibility for the Cleveland Heights portion of the park, however, lay with the city's Planning Commission, which found itself caught between energized, organized supporters and opponents of the expansion. Supporters argued that the proposed Community Center would enhance the city's reputation, add much needed space for hockey and basketball, and bring residents, including seniors and children, together in a central location. Historic preservationists argued that the expansion would destroy the Rockefeller legacy; environmentalists, that it would destroy the natural landscape. Others just thought the proposed building was

ugly. As tempers rose, the commission postponed its decision at a July 1998 meeting at which members of the audience impugned commission members' integrity. A month later, the commission vetoed the expansion – the vote was 4-3.<sup>10</sup>

Now thoroughly enraged, on November 2, 1998, supporters of the expansion, including dozens of young hockey players in uniform, stormed the City Council meeting, pointing out that the bond issue, in which plans for the expansion had been clearly spelled out, had won overwhelmingly with 55 percent of the vote. "Build the Rec Center Already," exclaimed one sign.<sup>11</sup>

In January 1999, the commission – with some new members – reversed itself and gave the new building its final okay at the end of a marathon 7-hour meeting. "Something Stinks at City Hall," read one sign; "Stop the Wreck Center," read another. "The [Rockefeller] homeland has been desecrated," exclaimed one urban park expert; the expansion "is the worst example of park planning I have ever seen."<sup>12</sup>

The Community Center opened in January 2002. And so ended the most prolonged, most exhausting political battle in memory.

Right now, the grass in our parks is still green although the trees are beginning to change color, and the only battles are taking place on the baseball diamonds, the tennis and basketball courts, or in the soccer stadium.

We take pride in our "emerald necklace" created from a smelly ravine, abandoned quarries, and garbage dumps; we believe that our parks add material and spiritual value to our lives. And for over a century, our parks have sometimes united us, sometimes divided us, but have always enriched our political lives.

<sup>10</sup> Sun Press, July 30, 1998: 1,3; Plain Dealer, August 21, 1998: B-5.

<sup>11</sup> Sun Press, November 5, 1998: 1.

<sup>12</sup> Sun Press, January 21, 1999: 1, 5.

---

---

## JOIN TODAY!

All members receive the benefit of knowing that their membership dues help advance historic preservation opportunities for Cleveland Heights. Memberships are tax deductible.

# The Cleveland Heights Historical Society

PO Box 18337 • Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118

Please accept my yearly membership fee for:

- \$ 15.00 – The Marcus M. Brown Membership
- \$ 25.00 – The Patrick Calhoun Membership
- \$ 50.00 – The Barton and Grant Deming Membership
- \$100.00 – The John L. Severance Membership

Please make checks available to: *The Cleveland Heights Historical Society*

Name:

Date:

Address:

City:

State:

Zip:

Phone: (Daytime)

(Evening)

E-mail:

The Cleveland Heights Historical Society  
PO Box 18337  
Cleveland Heights, Ohio 44118